James Thomson’s most famous poem *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874) is generally accounted to be an apparently apocalyptic depiction of the city of London viewed as a necropolis and it is judged almost entirely by the gloomy pessimism that appears to permeate the poem’s narrative. In part this is justified, since its mood appears to reflect that of Thomson’s resistance to Victorian certainties and yet to mirror a general crisis of faith. Conveniently for this tidy narrative, Thomson’s sepulchral images seem to reflect if not predict the facts of his early death in poverty from alcoholism in London, and appear entirely consistent with his subsequent burial in the secular section of Highgate Cemetery. Seen in this light the journey of the narrator cartographises both the capital and Thomson’s own nature, the former rendered bleak and hopeless by the latter as if articulating a reciprocity. And yet this is deceptive, as such a prosaic commentary is very simply interrogated and challenged if one views Thomson’s work broadly and contextualises his aesthetic impulses and instincts. Although James Leatham entitles his study of the poet, *James Thomson (B.V.): The Laureate of Pessimism* (1917), and comments that ‘As a philosophy of life pessimism is probably anti-social; yet one is not quite sure. From at least the time of Job there have been pessimists, and it would be hard to say whether or not they have found less zest in life than optimists’, nevertheless Leatham proceeds to demonstrate that in his earlier work

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Philip Tew

Thomson was equally a ‘light humourist’ of London life. This balancing of an interpretative perspective of Thomson is not unique even in earlier criticism. In *Literary Sketches* (1888) Henry Salt appears initially incredulous about Thomson’s poetic response, concluding: ‘Yet the discrepancy is perhaps more apparent than real; for the fact that Thomson was endowed with keen powers of enjoyment, and had tasted at times some of the sweets of life, only serves to enhance the central and final gloom.’ At the very least, this antinomy suggests a complex relationship of art and the self, deepening the significance of Salt’s apparently simplistic statement that ‘James Thomson was pre-eminently a subjective poet; his life is the key to a proper understanding of his writings; and those who read between the lines of his poems and essays will not fail to discover that most of them are more or less autobiographical’. My contention is that his subjectivity must be read ideologically and historically, teased from certain personal and public experiences alongside the poetry, whilst acknowledging Valeria Tinkler-Villani’s observation that ‘To read the poem is to enter an inner space; from first to last the shapes and figures are shadows moving within the mind, and this holds the fragments together’. The verses articulate an ideological consciousness and its failings.

Certainly, historically Thomson’s early relationship with the city is intriguing, given the period’s transitional nature for the capital. Although essentially a Londoner, technically James Thomson was not a native; his family migrated to the East End of London because of their poverty. The son of a working-class dressmaker and merchant seaman, Thomson was born on 23 November 1834 in Port Glasgow. Nevertheless he appears to have remembered little other than the metropolis apart from the trauma of his infant sister’s death, having afterwards at the age of five moved to the East End where his father could sign on and obtain papers for voyages. Thomson’s early life was shaped by the social and economic forces inherent in the new industrial economics that would come to epitomise the industrial modernity of the

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